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NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

Indexed

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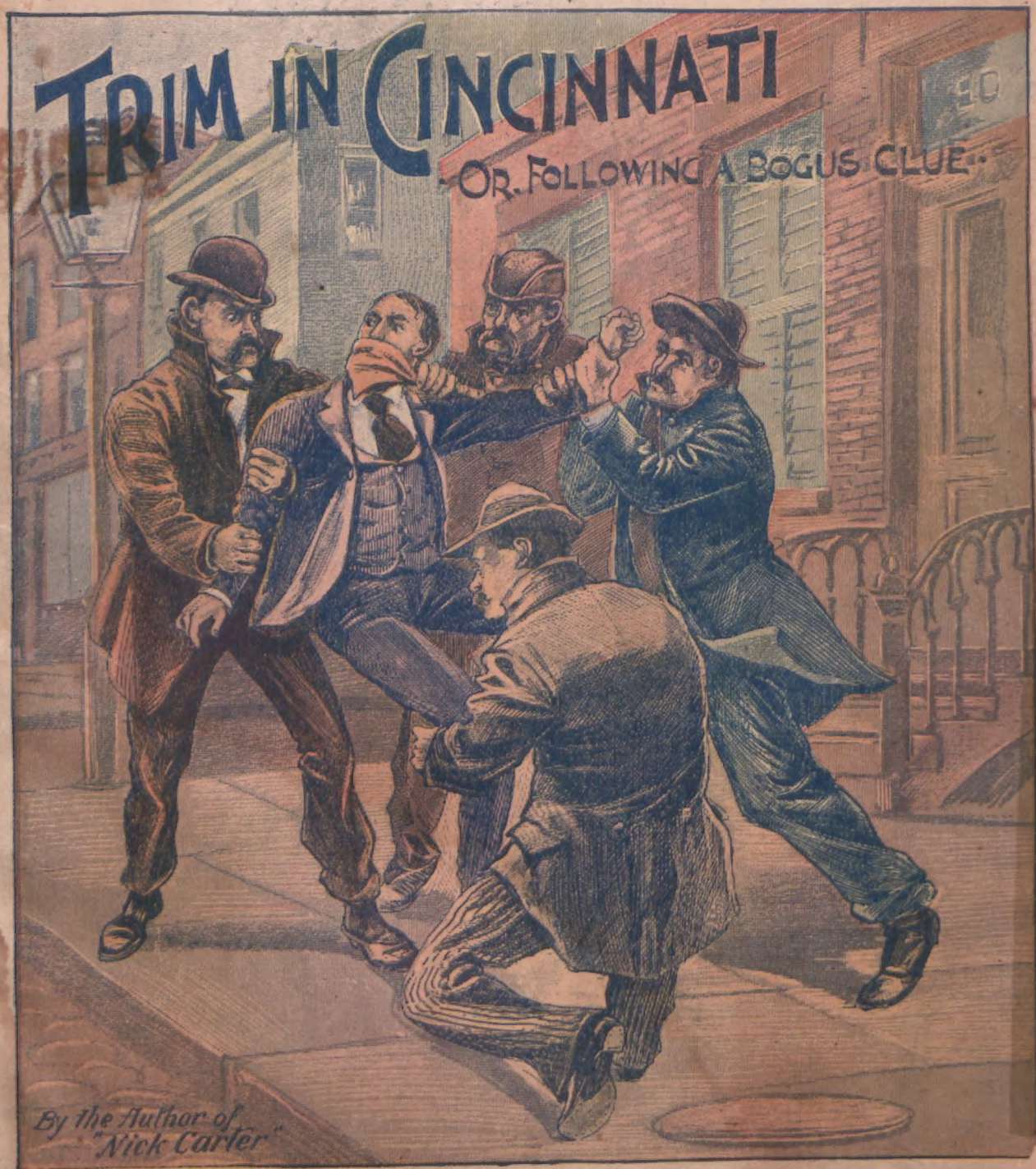

TRIM IS TAKEN AT A DISADVANTAGE.

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TRIM IN CINCINNATI;

OR,

Following a Bogus Clew.

By the Author of "NICK CARTER."

CHAPTER I.

A ROW WITH A STARTLING SEQUEL.

"Tain't fair, Jack!"

"Huh!"

"I see you don't care anything about my opinion."

"Not a rap!"

"You're treading on dangerous ground, Jack."

"Pugh!"

"I tell you this sort of course will get you into trouble."

"Nonsense!"

"Look out, I tell you if somebody else doesn't get after you with a sharp stick, I will."

"You don't dare to, Bert."

"We'll see about daring by and by."

"Better see about it now and have done with it!"

"I had, eh?"

"So it seems to me. You're taking up a lot of business time with your complaints."

"Business time? That's a fine word!"

"Well, what else would you call it?"

"It's nothing short of swindling and you know it!"

"You don't answer. You don't even make a retort at what ought to be an offensive remark. Well then, Hardy——"

"It strikes me that if you talk about swindling, it's something like the pot calling the kettle black, isn't it?"

"I'll admit it; and I was just going to tell you that you've disproved a famous old proverb."

"Have I?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"They say, 'there's honor among thieves.'"

"You call me a thief, then, do you?"

"I do, a most contemptible——"

This entertaining conversation which

took place in the private office of Hardy & Gardner, commission merchants, Fourth Street, Cincinnati, was interrupted at this point.

Henry Warren, junior partner in the concern and Frank Beck, the chief clerk, who were listening intently at the door, that led into the main office, heard a great rumpus succeed the sound of angry voices.

It was as if each man had picked up a chair to hammer the other.

Then it seemed as if they had clinched and were doing their best to wipe up the floor with each other.

The noise of jumping and tumbling about was mingled with hoarse groans and cries of rage.

Beck glanced at the junior partner with an expression of alarm.

Warren smiled grimly.

"I don't know," he said, laying his hand upon the door knob, "but what we'd better interfere."

"They'll kill each other if we don't," said Beck.

"Oh! no, I don't think it will come to that, but they might break the furniture and the windows."

"They'll hurt each other pretty badly if they're not separated," remarked Beck.

"Well I guess we'd better interfere. You take charge of Gardner and I'll manage Hardy. Come on!"

Mr. Warren threw open the door and both men rushed in.

Just as they did so the two men, who had clinched, fell to the floor with a terrific crash.

There they rolled over two or three times knocking down chairs and raising a hubbub that might have been heard a block away if it had not been for the noise of passing wagons in the street.

They kept their arms clinched, and after a second or two it appeared that Hardy, the senior partner, was on top.

"Hi there! Break away, boys!" exclaimed Warren with a laugh.

"Come, Jack, you've got the best of him and that's enough"

With this he caught his partner by the shoulders and pulled him up violently.

"Let me alone!" exclaimed Hardy furiously.

"I'd like to break the scoundrel's —— head!"

"You don't want to do anything of the kind, Jack!" retorted his partner pushing him into a corner of the room and making him sit down.

"You know well enough that Albert Gardner is the last man that you want to have a row with."

"But he called me a thief!"

"Well, well! what if he called you a thousand thieves, that doesn't prove anything, does it?"

"I shouldn't be half a man if I didn't resent it."

"Ay! old man—and you've resented it, haven't you? Talk about half a man, why you've done as well as two men and I'm glad of it, but now you want to cool down."

"It's well enough to say cool down! If you had been in my place——"

"I hope I would have done just as you have; then you would come and tell me just as I'm telling you that he's only a foul-mouthed nobody who doesn t deserve any serious attention."

Meantime Frank Beck had picked up Mr. Albert Gardner, the other fighter, and was having his own little difficulties in preventing that gentleman from continuing the scrimmage.

"That's right, that's right!" exclaimed Gardner, excitedly. "Come and join your employer in pitching into me.

"Get two or three against me and of course you can lick me!"

"Confound it! Bert," exlaimed Beck, "I don't want to lick you, I only want to save you from a licking."

"Save me? Pugh! I can do him up in one round."

"That's all right. But you didn't seem to be doing him up when I came in."

"I didn't, hey? I tripped on a chair, that's why. Let me get at him!"

"No, no, sit down and pull yourself together!"

Beck pushed Gardner into a chair and held him there a moment while the fighter panted and glared angrily across the room at his antagonist.

In the course of the scrimmage a good many articles had been knocked from the desk and table and besides these on the floor were various papers, penknives, etc., that had fallen from the pockets of the two foes.

It seemed pretty certain that the men having been separated would not resume the combat and so Beck got down on his knees to pick up the things that were on the floor.

When Mr. Warren referred to Gardner as "a foul-mouthed nobody," the latter jumped to his feet and shouted:

"Nobody, am I! well I'll teach both you miserable robbers that there's at least one nobody in the world——"

"See here!" interrupted Warren, turning upon the angry man, while he kept one hand upon his partner's shoulder, "you shut up and get out.

"We've had quite enough of this sort of talk for one day and we don't want you here again unless you've got business that you can talk about in a business fashion, understand?"

Beck stood up and prepared to stop Gardner if he should attempt to renew the fight.

After a slight pause Gardner said:

"All right! I'm going to go but it's not because you turned me out; I'm not afraid of either of you or both put together.

"I'm going because I think it's better business to do so, and I warn you that when I come again there'll be trouble."

He was going on abusing both partners in a high voice when Beck interrupted:

"I say, Bert," he said, "don't talk so loud. You'll regret it if you do.

"Run along home now, or to your office and cool down!

"Go on! that's a good fellow."

Gardner glared at him for an instant and replied:

"You mean well, Frank Beck. You're a good fellow, but I advise you to get out of this business.

"You could be in much better company."

"I suppose," snapped Hardy, "you would like to employ him in your office."

"There, there, Jack!" exclaimed Warren. "Keep quiet! Let's have this row done with."

"Go on, Bert, or you'll make a bad matter worse," urged Beck pushing the angry man toward the door.

"I want my papers," said Gardner feeling in his pockets.

"All right, you shall have them. This belongs to you, doesn't it?"

Saying this Beck passed him a large wallet that he had picked up from the floor.

"Yes, that's mine, and these."

Here he stooped to pick up some scattered letters.

"And this."

The last article was a penknife.

Gardner looked the floor over, and, satisfied that he had got everything that belonged to him, left the room muttering to himself.

Beck glanced at the partners and then followed Gardner to the front door.

"I say, Bert," he remarked, "let a friend advise you not to say anything about this until you've cooled down.

"You know well enough what trouble

may come in hasty words spoken to outside parties."

Gardner answered Beck:

"I'll mind my own business.

"I'm not taking any offense at you, understand, but I'll do as I please and when the trouble comes I should be glad for your sake if you're not employed by this concern."

"I've got to earn a living somewhere, you know," Beck remarked.

"Yes, but you're the kind of man who ought to mean to earn it honestly."

Beck flushed.

"I don't like that from you, Bert!" he exclaimed in a low tone.

"I don't want to have any more row, but you've no business to talk that way to me."

"The receiver," declared Gardner, "is as bad as the thief. And working as you are here I tell you that you are as bad as the receiver."

Beck pressed his jaws together, frowned angrily and closed the door upon Gardner.

Then he returned to the private office.

Hardy still sat in the chair where Warren had placed him.

"Has he gone?" asked Warren.

"Yes," replied Beck.

"I reckon it's just as well you interfered," said Hardy, "for I believe that in another minute I would have killed the fellow."

"I guess you would!" responded Beck. "You had the advantage of him that's certain."

Hardy got up and walked across the room once or twice showing in his nervous movements and trembling hands how fearfully excited he had been.

Beck resumed his task of putting the floor to rights. He placed several articles upon the table and set the overturned chairs in order.

One of these had been badly broken.

"I reckon we'll have to send this to the hospital," he said with a grin.

"Put it in the closet," responded Warren; "we don't want it lying around where the next visitor can see it and ask questions about it."

Beck complied and as he turned from the closet door he saw something upon the floor near where the men had been struggling.

He picked it up and looked at it curiously.

"Is this yours, Mr. Hardy?" he asked.

Hardy glanced at it carelessly.

"No," he said, "I don't know whom it belongs to."

It was a skeleton key.

"It probably belongs to Gardner," Beck remarked indifferently. "And I'll take care of it."

He took it into the main office with him and laid it upon his own desk.

In a few minutes later Mr. Warren joined him there, and the ordinary business of the establishment was resumed.

Hardy and Warren's offices were upon the ground floor.

The private office where Hardy had his quarrel with Gardner could be approached not only from the main rooms where Beck and Warren had their desks, but also from a court surrounded entirely by high buildings and reached by a narrow alley leading from Fourth Street.

The concern, as has been noted, was in the commission business and their dealings were mainly with farmers.

They had no room in that building devoted to the storage or display of produce but the court mentioned, nevertheless, was used almost always when the farmers came in to call upon them.

They were in the habit of driving through the alley and hitching their horses in the court, while they went inside to speak to one or both of the partners.

It often happened that they brought loads of produce with them which either Hardy or Warren would examine.

If the concern accepted the produce for sale the farmers then drove it to a building in another part of the city for storage.

It was not unusual for farmers to drive into the court, hitch their horses and go straight into the private office by the court door instead of coming around first to the main office.

The quarrel with Gardner had taken place at about four o'clock in the afternoon.

It was very seldom that business callers came later than that hour and it was the custom to close the office for the day at five.

Both Warren and Beck had a considerable quantity of delayed work to finish on that day, and the quarrel had put them just so much further behind; therefore they busied themselves at their desks for something more than an hour very intently.

Nobody came in.

During that interval Mr. Hardy remained in the private office.

At last Beck put down his pen and yawned.

"I reckon I can call it a day's work," he said turning to the junior partner.

"You're in luck," responded Warren, "for I've got a good deal to do yet."

"Can't I help you out?"

"No, I think not. If you're anxious to go you can leave now and I'll lock up when I get through."

"I don't suppose," said Beck, "that I've got any business to go looking around for more work than I'm required to do, yet at the same time I think you had better let me take hold there and help you."

"I'm much obliged," was the response, "but I don't see that there is much that you can do.

"Hardy might give me a lift if he isn't too busy; suppose you speak to him."

"All right!"

Beck went directly to the door of the private office and went in.

It was not the custom in this establishment to knock before entering the private office; accordingly Beck walked in saying:

"Mr. Hardy, Mr. Warren would like to know would you come— Great God!"

Warren, sitting at his desk in the main office, heard the clerk's words and noticed the horror with which he uttered the last.

"What's up?" he cried jumping from his desk and running to the private office.

It took but a glance to show what had happened.

Lying upon the floor by his desk was the body of John Hardy.

The head was turned toward the main office and the carpet where it lay was soaked with blood.

A terrible gash across Hardy's throat showed what had been done; but at the first glance there was no evidence to indicate who had committed the deed.

Warren knelt by his partner and felt his pulse.

"Dead! and turning cold!" he muttered.

Beck terribly shocked, stood holding to a chair for support.

"I must run for a doctor," he said faintly.

"No, not yet," replied Warren standing up, "there's no hurry."

'Are you quite sure that he's dead?" asked Beck.

"Positive! No doctor can be of any use here.

"But there has to be an examination in such matters!"

"But there's no hurry about it, I tell you. We've got to think it over."

Beck didn't seem to understand.

Warren's face was clouded with anxiety.

"We've got to think it over!" he repeated.

He stepped across the room to the door that opened upon the court and found it locked; but the key was not in the lock as was usual.

Warren took a bunch of keys from his pocket, found one that fitted the lock and inserted it.

"No!" he said suddenly, "that won't do!"

He returned the keys to his pocket.

He stood then for a moment staring thoughtfully at Beck.

"I don't understand what you're driving at," said Beck faintly.

"Let's go into the main office if you can think cooler there," responded Warren.

They accordingly went into the main office shutting the door behind them.

For a few moments Mr. Warren paced up and down silently; at last he said as he stopped in front of Beck:

"What do you think of it, Frank?"

"Think of it?" retorted Beck with a shudder.

"It's a case of murder, of course.

"The murderer came in through the court door, took Mr. Hardy unawares and went out the same way he came in, locking the door behind him possibly with the idea that it would cause the police to think that the job was done from the inside."

Warren nodded.

"I can see from that," he said, "that your thoughts are cool.

"But that isn't what happened, Frank."

"No? What then?"

"It's a case of suicide!"

"Suicide? Good——"

"Yes, suicide, sure!"

"But what reason——"

"Frank, we've not got to find reasons for a dead man.

"The fact is enough."

"But the fact, then how can it be proved?"

"Think a minute, Frank! The only thing that can be proved is that Jack is dead and that his throat's cut.

"After you've thought that over, think what would happen if a raking investigation was made."

Beck's thoughts grew even more serious than they had been before.

"I begin to see," he said. "There are certain things that would be brought to light."

"Exactly! No investigation can bring Jack Hardy to life, but any investigation is pretty certain to lead to the discovery of certain things that you and I and others would prefer to remain unknown."

CHAPTER II.

FIXING UP A CLEW.

After a moment of silence Beck said:

"It's all well enough for us to adopt this view; but when the officials make their examination what is to prevent them from thinking of murder?"

"Nothing except that the court door is locked and you and I have been here in the office all this time.

"We heard no row."

"Except that one with Gardner."

"True! and we know how that ended."

"Yes, and if there had been any other row we would have likely heard that too."

"That's it."

"Now nobody is going to cast suspicion on us, or if they should we can clear ourselves easily.

"If there be no ground for suspicion upon anybody else, no investigation will be made, see?"

Beck nodded.

"Hasn't anybody driven into the yard to see Hardy since Gardner was here?"

"Frank!" responded Warren, "if you didn't hear anybody drive into the court, or see anybody there since the quarrel with Gardner, I think that you're in a good way to testify that nobody did drive in."

"I see," he answered slowly; "whatever you know it is best that you keep it to yourself, and whatever I don't know points in the right direction; is that it?"

"That's it!"

"Well, suppose," said Beck still very slowly, "that Gardner has made some foolish remarks about his row with Hardy.

"You may remember that he used threatening language about coming again."

"I do remember."

"Well, suppose suspicion should point his way?"

"I've been thinking," returned Warren, "that that might be just as well for us as anything else.

"If Gardner is innocent of the murder he can prove it somehow.

"He can probably set up an alibi.

"If he can't prove it he won't dare to make certain exposures that other people might make, because if he did, although he might be acquitted on the charge of murder he would find himself in a hot box of another kind."

"Yes, that's so."

Beck's hand closed over something that lay on his desk.

"I suppose," he said, "that we must notify the authorities now."

"Yes, and leave them to their own judgment in the matter."

"Shall we suggest suicide?"

"As the only probable cause, yes."

"Shall I run out and notify the first policeman I meet?"

"Yes, that will be the way to do it and it must be understood that you did so immediately after the discovery of the mur—I mean—suicide."

Beck started away from his desk.

"Where are you going?" asked Warren suddenly.

"I'm going to take another look into the room," was the reply.

"Do you think you need to do that?"

"Well, Mr. Warren, there seems to be some things that you don't care to tell me.

"Now if I know one or two things that may help to put this thing along in the right way, wouldn't it be just as well if I keep them to myself?"

Mr. Warren thought a moment.

"I guess I can trust your judgment," he answered. "Go ahead!"

Beck went into the private office, dropped the thing he had taken from his desk upon the blood-soaked carpet by the dead man's head, and then ran hastily out through the main office to the street.

As luck would have it the first person he met was not a policeman but Mrs. John Hardy.

This lady, it seemed, had had an appointment with her husband at a store not far from the office and as he failed to keep it, had come to find him.

It is not necessary to go into the details of the painful scene that followed.

It is sufficient to say that Mrs. Hardy was informed of her husband's tragic end and after the first violent outburst of grief she became remarkably cool, and took a course of action that completely upset the strange plan of mystery and silence that had been advised by the junior partner.

She would not hear of suicide as an explanation of her husband's death.

When it was suggested she flew into a passion and went so far as to accuse Beck and Warren of having committed murder.

The police, of course, had charge of

the affair within a very short time and it did not need Mrs. Hardy's assistance to make them reject the suicide theory.

Therefore they would have gone to work to make such investigation as they could and there is no telling what would have been the result of it, but Mrs. Hardy went to the farthest limit in demanding that the affair be investigated.

She had learned from a friend that Trim Carter was in the city, and as soon as she could possibly break away from the office she hurried to the hotel where Trim was staying and found the detective on the point of leaving for home.

She urged him frantically to undertake an investigation in her behalf, and Trim consented to do so after a brief consultation with the superintendent of police.

His services were welcomed, of course, by the department and orders were issued that he should have entire charge of the case.

So it came about that before the body of the dead man had been removed by the coroner's orders to an undertaking establishment, that Trim was on the spot making an examination in his own way.

He gave his attention first to the nature of the wound by which Hardy had been killed.

The junior partner stood by at the time.

He had already suggested the suicide idea to Trim and evidently hoped that the detective would favor it.

"Although there seems to be no cause for such an act," remarked Warren, "I can't think of anything but suicide to account for this; because the outside door was locked and nobody could have got into the place except by coming through the main office where Beck and I were at work."

"The door was locked and the key gone."

"Yes, but——"

"Where's the key?"

"I don't know where it was."

"Is it now in the outside of the door?"

"No."

"Then don't you see that it's perfectly possible for a criminal to go out through that court, locking the door after him and throwing the key away afterward?"

"Yes, I suppose that's possible."

"I don't see any knife here," continued Trim.

"Mr. Hardy's pockets haven't been examined," responded Warren.

"Does a man cut his own throat and then put the knife in his pocket?" asked Trim.

"I suppose not."

"It won't do to stop at suicide here, gentlemen.

"The nature of the wound, the condition of the door, and the absence of any instrument by which the man could have inflicted his own death shows only one thing.

"It's a case of murder."

There were several persons present when Trim said this.

Warren and Beck were there, a coroner's physician, two or three policemen and one or two business acquaintances of Mr. Hardy's.

Trim looked the group over.

"I want to see," he said, "only those who are connected with this firm, either as partners or as employees."

The policeman took the hint and turned out everybody except Warren and Beck.

"Now, gentlemen," said Trim, when they were alone, "I want the history of this afternoon as completely as you can possibly give it to me."

"Well, Beck," said Warren nervously, "you were here all the time and I was in and out.

"Tell the detective what happened."

"Why!" Beck responded in an embarrassed way. "There wasn't much of anything out of the ordinary.

"Mr. Hardy was in his private office

almost all the time seeing various visitors."

"Do you know who they were?"

"I know all who came through the main office."

"Do you know any others?"

Beck hesitated.

"Give him the names of all the visitors, Frank," Warren ordered.

"Well then," said Beck, "there was Mr.——'

"Wait a minute!" Trim interrupted. "Put them down in writing—full names and addresses."

It was a long list; not less than twenty names were set down and Trim wondered as he looked at them whether the name of the murderer was among them.

"Can you add any names to this list?" he asked handing the paper to Mr. Warren.

Warren read the list very attentively.

Among the names was that of Albert Gardner.

"It was hardly worth while putting down Mr. Gardner's name, was it, Frank?" he asked with an assumption of indifference.

"He was here, you know."

"Yes, but he stayed here for such a few minutes. However, I suppose the detective wants everything."

"Indeed I do!" said Trim.

"Do you think of anybody else who was here?"

Mr. Warren thought a moment and then added a couple of names.

"I saw them with wagons in the court," he said, "but whether they went in to see Mr Hardy I don't know; I presume they did."

"Does this belong here?" asked Trim.

He held up a skeleton key that was stained with blood.

He had found it on the floor when he was examining the fatal wound.

Warren looked at it with unmoved features.

Beck was not so successful.

He glanced first at the key and then at Mr. Warren.

"I'm very sure," he said, "that it doesn't belong to Mr. Hardy."

"Doesn't it belong in the office here anywhere?"

"No, I'm sure of that."

"Did you never see it before?"

Both men shook their heads emphatically.

Trim wrapped it in a sheet of paper and put it in his pocket.

"I should say," he said to himself, "that that was a good clew."

During this conversation the body of the victim had been removed by order of the coroner's physician to an undertaker's wagon that had been driven into the court.

The wagon was now driven away and after it had been gone the crowd that had hung around the outer door of the building gradually dispersed.

After the body had been removed Trim had Mr. Warren go into the private office with him.

There he took the list of names and went over it one by one, asking Mr. Warren in detail what had happened concerning each caller's visit.

As is usually the case in detective work, by far the greater part of this examination proved of no value to the detective, excepting as it convinced him that at east some of the names mentioned could not be regarded as suspects.

It is only important here to put down such matters as were discovered that proved to have a bearing one way or another upon the case.

So it may be said that Mr. Warren, though pressed sharply upon the matter, could not remember anything about the visit of Albert Gardner.

Meantime Beck was waiting his turn for examination in the room.

While there Gardner came in.

"I hardly expected to find you here, Frank," he began at once, "because it's so late.

"But I'm glad I have found you because I want to apologize to you for the way I spoke to you before I went away."

"That's all right," returned Beck nervously.

"I was terribly excited of course," continued Gardner, "but I do think I had every reason to use the strong language I used about your employers."

"Yes, but——"

"I went out for a long walk," Gardner went on, without heeding the interruption, "and I'm glad to say that I followed your advice and made no mention of my row with Jack.

"I feel a good deal cooler now although I don't care to see either him or Warren.

"I want you to realize that I would have come here and begged your pardon anyway; but at the same time I've another errand which made it quite necessary for me to come."

"Don't mention it," said Beck in confusion.

"What! not mention my other errand? I've got to, Frank.

"You see, after I had taken my walk, I went up to my office where there are some papers that I must have, and I found that I hadn't my key with me.

"I presume it dropped out of my pocket during that scuffle; and I thought that perhaps you might have found it or that you would let me go into the private room to look for it."

Beck's face was the picture of anxiety. Perspiration was rolling down it and his eyes were fairly bulging from their sockets.

"What on earth is the matter, Frank?" exclaimed Gardner.

"Bert, don't you know what's happened here?"

The reply was an astonished stare.

Beck threw up his hands with a gesture of despair.

"Why, Frank! you look as if you were deathly sick. What is it?"

Beck pulled himself together with great effort and then said in a low voice:

"Bert, you don't want to ask about that key.

"Don't dare to open your head again about it as long as you live!"

"But why not?"

"Now don't make any outcry when you've heard what I've got to tell you.

"Come closer so that I can whisper it!"

Greatly amazed Gardner stepped forward.

"Hardy is dead!" whispered Beck. "I found him with his throat cut from ear to ear a little after five o'clock!"

"Whew!" exclaimed Gardner under his breath.

"You don't understand," continued Beck rapidly. "He's been murdered, Bert!

"We were for making it out a case of suicide but we couldn't, it wouldn't go!"

"Yes, but——" began Gardner as the suspicion of the situation began to dawn upon him.

Beck interrupted:

"You haven't heard the worst of it.

"It's not only certain that he's been murdered but one of the sharpest detectives in New York has been lugged into the case by Mrs. Hardy. And he's now at this moment in the back room there examining Warren.

"He's asking about everybody who has called here to-day and neither one of us has said a word about your row; but, Bert, that detective found your key on the floor by Hardy's body and has got it now!"

CHAPTER III.

QUEER THINGS ABOUT THIS CASE.

Then for the first time Gardner realized in full the terrible truth of the situation.

It was a staggering blow and for a moment he could not think clearly.

Just as a drowning man reaches out blindly to clutch at a straw or even a shadow on the water, so Gardner tried desperately to believe that his innocence could be readily established.

"Great heavens!" he exclaimed under his breath, "Frank, the detective isn't going to regard that key as evidence, is he?"

"I saw him put it carefully in his pocket," Bert answered, "I have no doubt that he regards it as a clew."

Gardner was speechless with fright.

"You see," continued Beck, "he found it right by Hardy's body and it was even stained with blood.

"He's got a list of everybody who called at the office this afternoon, and if I'm not mistaken he'll investigate the movements of every one of them.

"I understand that his reputation is, that he never leaves a single chance, no matter how slight, untried, and it's a dead certainty that he'll make it his effort to discover the owner of that key."

"But," faltered Gardner, "can't the facts be explained to him?

"Why not tell him bluntly that Jack and I had a scrap and that the key was lost at that time? Both you and Warren can be witnesses to that."

Beck was quite as much agitated as Gardner.

The young man did not dare to confess that he himself had dropped the key where it was found, after the murder was committed, still less did he dare to suggest to Trim that a quarrel had taken place in the office, for previously he had asserted that nothing happened during Gardner's visit.

The fact was that Beck had dropped Gardner's key in the private office from a mixture of reasons.

He had been deeply offended by Gardner's remarks after the quarrel and felt that it would be a good revenge to get Gardner into difficulties.

At the time, he had felt that Gardner would find no serious trouble in proving his innocence and it is fair to say that the clerk's desire for revenge went only so far as a wish to bother Gardner and not permanently injure him.

Another reason for dropping the key as he did was his loyalty to the firm of Hardy & Warren.

Knowing as he did the full extent of their transactions he was quite aware that a searching investigation would reveal crookedness in the business affairs that would wreck the concern as well as himself.

He believed that Gardner was so placed that even if he were defending himself on the charge of murder he would not dare to make as his defense a charge that Hardy & Warren had swindled him; for if he did so he would have to admit that he himself had taken part in some of their swindling transactions and benefited by them.

Beck was really convinced that the murder was done by some victim of Hardy & Warren's rascality.

It seemed to him that if Gardner could be arrested for murder that Gardner would simply make every effort to prove his innocence by setting up an alibi and when he had done this successfully he would be released.

Then the whole thing would blow over, leaving the firm to continue its business in the former way.

Now, however, when Gardner had

come back with an apology for his harsh language and when it seemed as if a chain of evidence had been begun that would surely convict him of murder, Beck felt the keenest remorse.

He began to realize that it is a pretty serious affair to manufacture evidence against a man in a murder case.

The more he thought of it and the more he looked at Gardner's haggard face the worse he felt, when suddenly there occurred to him a thought that flashed across his brain like this:

"What if Gardner is really guilty?"

Why not?

Gardner had had a violent row with Hardy and had left the office proclaiming all manner of threats.

It was true that he had not said anything definite, that is, there had been no direct threat that he would kill Hardy, but he had declared he would return and when he came again there would be trouble.

Why should it not be possible that Gardner had returned and made his way into the private office through the court, committed the murder and then come back just as he had now as a bluff to guard himself against any possible suspicion?

Thoughts like this ran through Beck's mind while the two men faced each other in silence for several seconds.

"Why shouldn't I make a plain stand on the truth, Frank?" asked Gardner, who had been waiting in vain for an answer to his question.

"The truth, Bert!" responded Beck in a whisper, "can you stand on the truth?"

"What do you mean?"

Gardner was startled but too dazed by the seriousness of his situation to take in at once the hidden meaning in Beck's question.

Beck's voice trembled as he responded.

"It's not for me to make any accusation, Bert. I'm only thinking of what other people would say."

"But for Heaven's sake, man! What would other people say?

"If you're any friend of mine help me out and let me see the worst."

"Well, then, see here! If you should admit that you had that scrap with Hardy, and Warren and I should tell all that occurred, as I suppose we would have to, the next question that would be asked is:

"'Where did you go after leaving this office?'"

"I went for a walk."

"Yes, but where?"

"I started out down Fourth Street; I met half a dozen persons who will remember that they saw me."

"Yes, but that accounts for only a few minutes."

Gardner stared.

"Is there anybody," asked Beck, "who went with you during all that walk?"

"No."

"Could you bring enough witnesses to account for all your time between the end of the scrap and the moment you walked in here just now?"

"I don't know."

"Where did you go?" insisted Beck, beginning to feel a terrible excitement as his suspicion became almost a conviction that Gardner had committed the murder.

"The fact is," answered Gardner, "I can't half account for the first of my walk; I was so angry that I didn't notice just where I was going, and turned this way and that.

'I know I was down by the docks part of the time——"

"Bert, do you know that you didn't come back here?"

"I see how 'tis!" exclaimed Gardner bitterly.

"I've got not only to fight against the

suspicions of a prying detective but also against the damaging statements that you and Warren will make to him.

"I've got to fight for my life, and my former friends are going to do their best to have me hanged!"

"No, no, Bert!" interrupted Beck, "haven't I told you that both Warren and I have taken pains to conceal the fact that there was a scrap here this afternoon?"

"Yes, you told me but how soon will it be before you give him the whole story?"

"I don't intend to mention the matter."

At this moment there was a sound at the door of the private office as if somebody had turned the knob preparatory to opening it.

Gardner glanced at the door with a startled expression.

"I've got to get out and think this thing over," he exclaimed quickly.

"For Heaven's sake, Frank, don't give me away!"

"I shan't," replied Beck, "you had better go quickly."

"Is there any way of getting at that key?"

"Impossible! you had better not be seen here."

Gardner did not wait for further urging but hurried quietly out of the office.

A moment later the door of the private room opened and Warren and Trim came in.

Trim was saying:

"I'd rather you wouldn't go yet, Mr. Warren. I want a short talk with Mr. Beck, and when I've got through I may like to ask you both some further questions."

"All right!" responded Warren calmly. "I suppose you've no objection to my going out to mail some letters that ought to have been posted an hour ago."

"Not the slightest," replied Trim.

Warren went to his desk and gathered up a handful of letters.

As he did so he gave a significant glance at Beck.

The latter went to his own desk and picked up some letters which he carried to Warren.

"These ought to go, too, Mr. Warren," he said, "and if you're going out you might as well mail them."

"I will."

As he took the letters Warren dropped one of them to the floor, and both he and Beck stooped to pick it up; Warren whispered:

"Not a word about the scrap."

At that moment Trim was looking the main office over and did not notice the dropping of the letter or hear the remark.

"I suppose," he said, as Warren started out, "that we may as well have our conversation in the private office, Mr. Beck."

The clerk followed the detective into Mr. Hardy's room where they both sat down.

"Mr. Beck," said Trim, pleasantly, "how long have you been employed by this firm?"

"Since it was organized, sir."

"And that was——"

"A little less than a year ago."

"What are your duties?"

"I take charge of the routine accounts, look after some of the correspondence, see visitors on minor matters——"

"In short you're kind of general assistant or right-hand man, aren't you?"

"That's about it."

"I suppose your relations to your employers are of a confidential nature?"

"They are, sir. Mr. Hardy used to refer to me as his confidential clerk."

"Are there any other clerks in the concern?"

"Not at present."

"Have there been?"

"Yes."

"How many?"

"There have been three."

"What did they do?"

"Helped at the bookkeeping."

"What became of them?"

"They were discharged."

"Why?"

This line of questions had been wholly unexpected by Beck and he was growing very nervous.

It seemed as if the detective was prying into just what he wished to conceal most.

"There was no reason," he answered awkwardly, "except that the amount of business didn't justify so large a force."

"The concern is prosperous, I suppose?" asked Trim.

After a good deal of hesitation Beck answered:

"Yes."

"I'm afraid you think," said Trim, with a smile, "that I'm asking impudent questions.

"I don't mean at all to drag any of the concern's secrets out of you.

"But you can see in a case like this it is necessary for me to find a motive for the crime.

"You can understand that, can't you?"

"Certainly, sir," answered Beck in so low a voice that he coughed and cleared his throat in order to conceal his embarrassment.

These signs of course, were not lost upon Trim; but he had no reason to suppose that they indicated anything more than excitement that would naturally arise from such a tragic occurrence.

"Understanding that," the detective continued, "tell me whether the three clerks left their employment here with good feeling."

Now it happened that this question was more embarrassing than any of those that had preceded it.

In every case the assistant clerks had been discharged because it was found that they would not willingly help out any shady transactions of the firm.

The result was that they were discharged without cause, and each one of them felt very sore over it.

Beck was determined that the detective should not be assisted in getting any insight into the methods of the firm, and as he was rather a quick-witted fellow, he saw at once that it would not do to have suspicion thrown upon any of the discharged clerks.

If they were examined it would be more than likely that they would give information that would lead to a general exposure, so he answered:

"Of course the boys felt sore to lose their job but they took it in good part, as one of the misfortunes of business and I think each one of them found a place elsewhere within a short time."

"Then you wouldn't say that any one of these clerks might wish to take revenge upon Mr. Hardy?"

"Oh, no! no! nothing of the kind!"

"Please give me the names of these clerks and their addresses if you know them."

Beck had thought that he had steered the detective straight away from this line of inquiry, and this question threw him into great confusion.

He stammered that he didn't believe that he knew their addresses.

Then his quick wit came to his aid and he saw it was best to appear to give the detective every information that he sought for.

So he wrote the names and addresses upon a slip of paper and passed it over.

Trim glanced at the slip and put it in his pocket.

"Now," he said, taking up the list of visitors, "do you know of any one who might be put down as an enemy of Mr. Hardy?"

"No, sir," responded Beck promptly.

The very promptness of this reply struck Trim unfavorably.

"I wonder," he reflected, "whether this young man imagines he is called upon to conceal something."

Without giving any indication of what was passing through his mind he said:

"Perhaps the word enemy seems too strong, Mr. Beck; when a murder has been committed it's pretty hard to understand how any man could feel that he had sufficient cause for committing such a deed; but you must know that in the course of business many a man finds himself beaten and sometimes ruined by the superior shrewdness, sense, or good luck of a rival.

"There have been cases in New York where a defeated rival has attempted to kill his successful competitor.

"It won't do any harm to any innocent man if you let me know whether Mr. Hardy had any rivals who cherished bitter feelings toward him."

Beck squirmed uncomfortably in his chair.

"I don't think I know any such," he responded.

Trim reflected a moment.

When he spoke again, he asked suddenly:

"Somebody was in the office while I was talking with Mr. Warren. Who was it?"

Beck was completely taken back by this question.

"While you were talking with Mr. Warren?" he repeated vaguely.

"Yes, certainly," responded Trim sharply; "who was it?"

"Oh, I remember," Beck answered as he recovered his wits; "'twas Mr. Martin Jones. He's a business friend of Hardy's and he came in to make some inquiries about the death."

"What's Mr. Jones' address?"

Beck, feeling that he made a terrible mistake, gave the address and Trim wrote it down upon the list.

Then the detective went over the list of names one by one just as he had done when he examined Warren.

He asked no more searching questions about the name of Albert Gardner than he did about any of the others.

As yet nothing whatever had occurred to give Gardner's name any prominence.

Beck was faithful to his instructions and as he did not know what Warren had said about Gardner's visit, he professed to be entirely ignorant of its nature.

"That's all for to-night, Mr. Beck," Trim said at length.

"I suppose that you will be in the office as usual to-morrow morning?"

"Certainly, sir."

"What time do you usually get here?"

"Nine o'clock."

They went into the main office where they found Warren awaiting them.

"Before you go, gentlemen," the detective said, "I wish you would both come here so as to answer any questions that may occur to me while I'm looking the room over."

Up to this time Trim had made no examination of the room beyond a little looking about that he did when he first found Hardy's body there.

Now he began a systematic search from one end to the other.

He was not looking for anything in particular but simply keeping his eyes open for anything that might suggest a clew.

The junior partner and the clerk watched him with feverish anxiety.

Trim gave no hint as to what he had in mind and neither of them ventured to ask him a question.

In the course of his search the detective opened a closet door, gave a running glance at its contents and then pulled out a broken chair.

"What's this?" he asked.

Warren laughed with an attempt at jocoseness.

"That's a subject for the hospital," he said; "it's lying there waiting until some chair mender comes along to put it in order."

"When was it broken?"

"Oh, some time ago."

"Did some extra heavy man sit down on it suddenly?"

"No, a couple of young fellows got wrestling and skylarking after business hours and they fell together on that chair and so smashed it."

"That was some time ago, you said."

"Oh, yes. Three or four weeks. Wasn't it, Beck?"

"I should say it was at least that," Beck responded.

Trim seemed to be satisfied and put the chair back in the closet.

"I guess we don't need to stay here any longer to-night," he remarked.

They left the office, Beck locking the doors; and when they were on the street they bade each other good-evening and separated.

"I thought this was going to be an easy case," Trim reflected. "And it may prove to be yet; but there are some funny things about it that I didn't expect.

"I don't like the way that clerk answered questions; I can't help feeling that Warren is holding back something; and I know they lied to me about that broken chair.

"The wood where the break occurs is as white and fresh as if I had broken it myself just now.

"If that chair had been smashed three or four weeks ago the splinters would have been discolored by this time with dust.

"Well, I'll remember that chair and talk about it a little later.

"Meantime I must trace this key."

CHAPTER IV.

BURGLARY DISCOVERED.

Before leaving the vicinity of Hardy & Warren's office Trim went around into the court at the back and took a general look at things there.

Then he went to his hotel and had supper.

That concluded, he gave his attention to the key.

There was no mark upon it whatever by which it might be identified.

"Somewhere in Cincinnati," he reflected, "there's a lock that this key fits.

"I must find it.

"Sometimes keys of this kind have numbers stamped upon them by which it is possible to trace them.

"This hasn't anything. It simply has a few stains of blood which mean nothing under the circumstances, and the ordinary marks of wear that show that it has been carried in somebody's pocket for a considerable time.

"I should say, therefore, that there would be no sense in looking for a new lock.

"Now then, what kind of a place would this lock up?

"I think it's safe to say from the size of it that it isn't a trunk key.

"It's certainly not the key to a safe or any other strong box, unless some Cincinnati man has invented a strong box unlike any that I've ever seen.

"Leaving out trunks and safes, then, there remain the outside doors of houses and the inside doors of houses and the doors of offices.

"There are a good many thousand such doors in Cincinnati; it would be worse than hunting for a needle in a haystack to start at one end of this town and ex-

amine every door between it and the other end.

"There must be a simpler way of getting at it than that.

"Now let's see."

He referred to the list of callers that Beck and Warren had made for him.

"It looks to me," he reflected, "as if that murder was done by somebody who isn't on this list.

"The probabilities are that the murderer entered the office from the court and went away unseen by anybody.

"At the same time it is possible that he had been in the office during the day.

"It looks to me as if it was best to play for the chance that the key belongs to somebody on this list and it won't take long to-morrow morning to examine some of the doors at least to which those men have keys.

"Under the circumstances, of course, the owner of the key isn't going to turn up to inquire for it; for the sake of making a beginning I'll presume that this is a key to an office.

"It looks more like that than anything else. And as I've got to begin somewhere I'll begin there."

While Trim was studying this problem he had a caller in the person of the superintendent of police.

"Well, Trim," said the latter, "I suppose you've made a good deal of progress."

"Some."

"Do your suspicions point anywhere in particular as yet?"

"I can't say they do. I'm trying to narrow down the possibilities but I find it rather hard.

"What sort of a concern is this, Hardy & Warren, anyway?"

"Their standing seems to be all right," replied the superintendent, "considering that they are a new house.

"I believe they do rather an extended business by correspondence in other parts of the country."

"They take goods on consignment here," asked Trim, "and dispose of them in New York and elsewhere?"

"Yes, that's about it."

"Do they have a reputation for square dealings?"

The superintendent smiled.

"You've got me there," he replied. "It's hard to say whether their reputation in that respect is good or bad."

"I should infer from that," said Trim, "that there are some people who think it's bad."

"Well, you know," said the superintendent, "when the farmers send in their produce to a commission house they are likely to growl a good deal if they don't get as high a price as they expected.

"You won't find a commission house in Cincinnati that doesn't have some kicking among its customers."

"I suppose so."

"I don't know of anything," continued the superintendent, "to indicate that Hardy & Warren have had any more discontent among their people than any other concern."

"Have you had Warren and Beck shadowed?" asked Trim.

"Oh, certainly! I did exactly as you requested in that matter.

"Four of my best men are detailed on the job and it won't be possible for either Warren or Beck to do anything to-night that they won't be aware of."

"That's good!"

"Do you suspect that either of them had a hand in it?"

"No, I don't; not yet. But I feel that they will bear watching, that's all."

After some further conversation, during which nothing of importance was developed the superintendent left and Trim retired as he wished to be up very early

the next morning to begin his search in tracing the key.

He had examined the list of callers and found that of those who had offices in the city all occupied buildings which were closed to the public during the night.

Accordingly there was nothing for him to do until the buildings should be reopened.

Knowing that janitors and scrub women would be busy in the buildings long before the tenants arrived, Trim started out to make a tour of certain buildings before business hours.

Following the plan that he had made the night before he went only to those buildings in which were offices occupied by the men who were upon his list of callers.

In each of these buildings he limited his examination to a glance at the outside office door of that person whose name figured upon his list.

In this way he went rapidly through half a dozen buildings and in each one saw that there was no lock that could possibly be opened by the key he had found in Hardy's room.

Eventually he came to a building upon Central Avenue in which every floor was devoted to offices.

There was only one name on his list that concerned him here and that was the name of Albert Gardner.

Trim found that this man had an office on the fourth floor of the building.

It was before the hour for starting the elevator service. The detective therefore walked up the stairs until he came to the fourth floor.

Just as he came to the head of the stairs he saw a scrub woman on her knees with a brush and dust pan.

She rose as Trim approached and went down the hall where she emptied her dust pan in a canvas bag that lay on the floor by her broom and water pail.

There was nothing significant in this at the moment; but Trim discovered presently that she had been at work on the floor directly in front of Gardner's office door.

When he saw that the detective scratched his head.

"The lock on that door," he said to himself, "couldn't be opened by this key.

"The pattern of the keyhole shows that, and there is the other fact, that probably means nothing, that that lock is new."

He stooped to examine it closely.

"I'm a wooden injun," he said to himself, "if that lock hasn't been put there very recently."

The detective's reason for this conclusion lay in two or three faint scratches upon the woodwork as well as the fact that the metal part of the lock which was exposed showed not the faintest trace of a scratch.

"I never saw a lock yet," he reflected, "that had been used a considerable time that didn't show some mark of where a man had accidentally struck it with his key while inserting it.

"I can't be mistaken; that's a new lock and it's been put on recently.

"That may mean a good deal after all."

The detective looked down at the floor.

It was damp, showing that the scrub woman had been over it with her mop at least twenty minutes or half an hour before.

Looking down the hall he saw that the woman was now turning into a branch corridor and making ready to mop there.

"I guess I'll have to get acquainted with her," he thought.

He strolled slowly down the hall after her and as he passed he saw the name J. H. Simpson, painted upon an office door.

When he turned into the branch corridor the woman was upon her knees scrubbing energetically.

"Good-morning!" he said pleasantly.

"Have you any idea when Mr. Simpson gets to his office?"

"Misther Simpson, is it?" answered the woman looking up with surprise. "Bedad! he niver comes here at this toime iv the day."

"I don't suppose he'll be here before nine or ten o'clock then, will he?"

The woman stopped scrubbing and answered:

"It's goin' on three year that I've been scrubbin' these floors an' niver in all that toime did Oi see Misther Simpson before Oi had me work all done."

"What time do you usually get your work done?"

"Half afther eight, sorr.

"If Oi don't hev it done by thin, shure the janitor do be raisin' an ugly to-do about it, sor.

"He'll hev it, sorr, that scrub wimin must be out iv the buildin' at half afther eight.

"It's bad luck to me this toime if Oi don't get finished on toime and indade it looks as if I won't."

With this she fell to scrubbing again with great energy.

"What's the matter with this morning?" asked Trim.

"Eh!" she groaned, "matther enough."

She did not seem disposed to volunteer the information Trim was hoping to get; so after a short pause while she continued to work the detective remarked:

"I suppose it bothers you when you're hurrying so, to have a man come along and ask foolish questions?"

"No, that's not it, sorr. It's not me that moinds a question from a plisent gintleman. It's the spalpeens that do bes comin' around and makin' you do your work over agin, that sours de heart out of me."

"Well, it certainly is hard luck," Trim responded, "to have to do your work over again."

"Yis, it be that."

"Confound her!" thought the detective. "Is there no way to lead her into saying something that I want to hear?"

It would have been easy for Trim to ask a direct question which probably would have brought him the information he wished, but the one thing he wanted to avoid was the appearance of asking questions about Gardner's door.

He did not want to take any chances that this woman would innocently mention the fact that somebody had been asking her questions, for that might lead a guilty man to suspect that a detective was on his track.

So after a short pause Trim began on a new tack.

"I presume you've got to do a good deal of work," he said, "to keep the pot boiling at home."

"Indade I do," she answered. "What with four children to care fur and me husban' dead these three years, it's a sorry toime I've had indade."

"That's hard luck!"

"You spake truly, sorr. An' I wouldn't moind hard work if there was only enough av it.

"Oi would do twice as much ivery day if there was only twice as much to do."

"You could find time for other work then, once in a while, could you?"

"Oh, yis, sorr; most ivery day."

"Well, I don't know but I might want to employ you, not regularly but once in a while."

"Oi should be glad to do anythin' that your honor wishes. What is it an' where?"

"I'll tell you later about that," Trim answered.

"Meantime to show that I mean to be straight in the matter I wish you would let me give you this five-dollar bill as a kind of advance payment."

"The saints be praised!" cried the

woman dropping the scrubbing cloth and taking the bill.

"It's a ginerous gintleman you are intirely. Now I shall know how to pay me rint."

"I shall be glad," said Trim, "if the money does you any good.

"And you mustn't let me interrupt your work now."

"No, sorr, Oi must keep at it."

"I suppose I must not step where you've scrubbed," said Trim, "or you'll have to do your work over again."

"Niver you moind that. It isn't the steppin' that troubles me, it's the litter the carpenters and the locksmiths do be makin'.

"It's meself that don't understan' why a carpenter or a lock tinker can't do his work at the same hours other people do them.

"Now moind ye! If that lock tinker that came fixin' over the door of Mr. Gardner's room this mornin', hed waited until his regular hours fer goin' ter work I wouldn't hev had to be brushin' up the litter as I did."

"Well, he did go to work early," Trim responded, delighted that he had at last gained just the information he wanted without having to beg for it.

"He was thet early," continued the woman, "that Oi didn't see him."

"What do you mean?"

"Oi mane thet Oi hed just scrubbed that floor which was the first Oi did this mornin' and thin Oi went upstairs to clane out Mr. Brown's room because I knowed he wus a comin' early to the buildin' this mornin', and whin Oi come down agin there was the shavins and the dust on the floor in front of Misther Gardner's door; so Oi hed to do me work over agin there."

"Then you didn't see the man who did the work?"

"No, sorr, niver a w[illegible]"

As this was all that Trim could get from the scrub woman he left after a few more commonplace remarks and returned to his hotel for breakfast.

"It may be only a coincidence," he reflected, "that this man Gardner should have had his lock changed this morning; but if he's the murderer he has certainly taken pains to prevent this key being any use to me, unless I can find the original lock that was upon his door.

"Some time during the morning I must manage to find out who that locksmith was.

"It doesn't seem possible that he could have gone into that building and done his work without being seen by the janitor or by some of the scrub women.

"I'll tackle that later and meantime I'll find out all I can about Gardner."

For this purpose Trim went to the office of Hardy & Warren at nine o'clock.

Both Warren and Beck were there and they greeted him excitedly when he entered.

"Mr. Carter!" exclaimed Warren, "there's more yet for you to do in this matter."

"So? What's up?"

"The office has been entered by burglars during the night!"

CHAPTER V.

TRIM'S NARROW ESCAPE.

"What do you miss?" asked Trim, promptly and quickly.

"Nothing as yet. We haven't had time to make an examination—we've only just got here."

"Did you come together?"

"No, Beck arrived about two minutes ahead of me."

Trim turned to the clerk.

"I can't give you any information about it, Mr. Carter," said Beck, "for as a matter of fact I didn't notice that

the office had been entered before Mr. Warren came in."

"Everything is exactly as we found it, Mr. Carter," said Warren, "and you can see for yourself what has been done while I make an examination of the safe."

Warren hastened into the private office where the safe stood and worked the combination lock.

As soon as he had opened it he found that the contents of the safe were undisturbed.

He hurried back into the main office and found Trim examining a window that looked out upon the alley leading from Fourth Street to the court in the rear.

"You can see, Mr. Carter," explained Warren, "how the thing was done."

"Yes," interrupted Trim, "and a bungling job it was."

It was evident that a pane of glass had been cut from the window and removed so that the burglar could reach in his arm and release the window catch.

As the window was not provided with burglar alarms, an entrance therefore after that was easy.

Before leaving, it appeared that the burglar had tried to reset the pane but had not been able to do so without leaving many traces of his work.

"That burglar," said Trim, "should have taken lessons of a glazier.

"Do you find that anything is missing?"

"I don't yet," replied Warren.

"What is the condition of your desk, Frank?"

Beck was looking his desk over.

"It seems to be all right," he answered, "although the articles on top have been disturbed and it looks as if somebody had tried to force one of the drawers."

"It's much the same as my desk," added Warren.

"What led you first to think that burglars had entered here?" asked Trim.

"The fact that the top of my desk was in confusion.

"Letter files had been disturbed and various things moved about."

"Anything else?"

"I thought possibly that Beck had been looking for some correspondence and so said nothing about it.

"I started to hang up my coat in that closet and found I couldn't open the door.

"I saw that the lock had been tampered with so that my key would not work.

"Then I caught sight of the pane of glass and I realized what had occurred."

Trim glanced at the closet door and saw something that made his heart beat faster.

It was a very little thing, only a scratch upon the wood, but he thought he knew what it meant.

Concealing his interest in the matter he remarked:

"It looks as if the burglar, having made his way into the office, reset the pane of glass before he went to work."

"Yes, that's it," interposed Warren, "and by the time he got ready to work he probably got frightened and went away for the safe hasn't been touched."

"Examine your files and see if anything is missing."

Warren did so and presently looked up and said:

"Yes, there are some letters gone."

"Do you know what they were?"

Warren hesitated.

"I think I can remember," he answered.

"I'll ask you to remember that presently. Meantime let me see the key to this closet."

Warren prompty took out his key ring and picked out a key which he handed to

the detective. The latter took it and tried to insert it in the lock.

"It won't fit," he said.

Both men stood near by watching him.

"Now, gentlemen," said Trim, as he handed back Warren's keys, "I'm going to open that closet and I want you to see how it's done!"

They drew closer and bent their heads to watch every movement.

Trim quietly took from his pocket a folded piece of paper, undid it and picked out the key that had been found near Hardy's dead body.

Without a word he inserted it in the lock, turned it and opened the door.

"There you are," he said.

Both men stared in amazement and Warren dropped trembling into a chair.

Trim was quick to follow up the advantage gained by the men's agitation.

"I don't need to say, gentlemen," he declared sternly, "that there's something here that demands an explanation."

"I can't explain! I don't understand it!" faltered Warren.

"I can explain the whole thing," retorted Trim.

"Under the circumstances I think you gentlemen will find it best now to modify the course you adopted yesterday and tell me everything that you have been concealing."

"Mr. Carter!" exclaimed Warren assuming a blustering manner, "you don't dare to hint that there is anything that I need to conceal!"

"Hint nothing!" retorted Trim. "I simply know that you have concealed a good deal.

"Now I don't need to tell you the ugly significance that there is in finding that that blood-stained key fits a closet in your own room.

"You two were the last persons, so far as known, who saw Mr. Hardy alive.

"You were in these offices at the time of the murder.

"You both held back things yesterday and you both deceived me on at least one point.

"Now then, if you've got any sense left you'll tell again what happened yesterday and this time you'll tell the truth."

Beck looked pitifully at the junior partner, sank upon a chair and covered his face with his hands.

Warren was thoroughly frightened.

His guilty mind imagined at once that the detective would endeavor to force the crime of murder upon him and rather than face that trouble he preferred to take the risks of exposing the crooked dealings of his firm.

"It's true, Mr. Carter," he stammered, "that we misled you yesterday in one respect, but it was done from the best of motives.

"And I can see now that we were mistaken in what we did."

"It's pretty late to see your mistake!" remarked Trim.

"Well, but I assure you that I'm absolutely innocent of the crime you're investigating and that until this moment I had no real suspicion as to who the guilty party was."

"You have a suspicion now, then?"

"I have."

"You think his name is Gardner?"

Both men were surprised at this.

It was beyond their power to imagine how Trim had learned anything about Gardner more than they had told him.

Both of them were wondering anxiously how much the detective had discovered.

"The fact is," began Warren nervously, when Trim interrupted.

"One moment! The fact is that that broken chair in the other room has something to do with the murder.

"Now then, let's start from that.

"How was that chair broken?"

It's hardly necessary to repeat the rest of the conversation here.

Both men broke down and told the detective all about the violent row between Gardner and Hardy, the facts of which have been already set forth.

At the conclusion of the story Warren added that he found that several letters from Gardner to the firm had been taken from his letter file during the night.

"What was the nature of those letters?" asked Trim.

"They had to do with commission business," Warren responded faintly.

"What was the cause of the row between those two men?"

"It was some disagreement they had in business."

"Did those missing letters refer to it?"

"Partly."

"Well, gentlemen," said Trim, "I hope you see what a frightful mistake you made yesterday in throwing me off the track.

"If you had told me about this row I should have then been supplied with a motive for the crime. I wouldn't have lost these hours.

"I would have had my eyes on Gardner all last night; quite likely would have had him behind the bars by this time.

"As it is, although I've reasons of my own for believing your story, I'm not yet wholly convinced that I've got it all."

"You have, you have!" cried Warren, "every word of it!"

"I've told all I knew too," insisted Beck.

This was a barefaced lie. Beck had not told how he had dropped the key which gave Trim his clew.

Neither had he confessed that his caller during the examination of Warren wasn't the Martin Jones whom he had mentioned. Trim had to discover that error by investigation at a later time.

"It's all well enough for you to assert your innocence," he declared, "but I'd be a very poor detective if I didn't put you both under arrest on suspicion of being accomplices in this crime."

Beck and Warren stared at each other in helpless fear.

"Is there anything we can do?" Warren began.

Trim interrupted:

"Not a thing! Unless you've some confession to make."

"But we've told you everything."

"We'll see about that. I've kept you talking here all this time because I've expected somebody to come from the superintendent's office.

"There are two officers at the door now so we won't have any further talk about it."

With this Trim went to the door, admitted the officers and gave both Beck and Warren in charge.

When they had been taken away to the station house Trim again turned his attention to the blood-stained key and the lock which it fitted.

"The murderer," he said to himself, "convinced that that key would be found and traced to the lock it belonged to, had the lock on his own door transferred to that closet in the night.

"He had had a big row with the firm.

"There were letters in the firm's possession that would show a motive for his crime; he therefore tried to kill two birds with one stone by stealing the letters and transferring the lock so that suspicion might fall upon one of his enemies.

"The next step then is the arrest of Gardner and at the same time, if possible, I must find the locksmith who did the work; for the accusation against Gardner is likely to fall through unless it can be proved that the lock now on this closet door was formerly upon the door of his office."

These reflections passed through Trim's mind as he was standing near the

window in the main office, through which the supposed burglar had entered.

Under the circumstances he had concluded to take charge of the office in the name of the law.

He now prepared to lock the doors and continue his investigation.

He turned to close the closet door which was still open when there was a crash in the window at his side.

A pane of glass flew into hundreds of splinters and something fell upon the floor just beyond Trim's feet.

With one glance at it he leaped clear over Warren's desk and then bounded on until he came to the further end of the room.

He was none too soon. As he brought up against the further wall there was a deafening explosion and the office was filled with a dense smoke.

Warren's desk was shattered and every pane of glass in the room was broken and a great deal of furniture was damaged and thrown down.

The detective himself was wholly uninjured although the force of the explosion caused him to stagger.

He instantly opened the outside door, locked it behind him and ran around to the alley that led to the court in the rear.

It took but a glance to show that the bomb must have been thrown through from the alley itself or from a window in the building opposite.

The noise had attracted the attention of everybody in the neighborhood and the street and alley were rapidly filling with an excited crowd.

Trim noticed that every window in the building opposite was closed.

That, however, signified nothing for if a bomb had been thrown from a window, the man who threw it would probably have closed the window quickly and disappeared.

There was no necessity for the detective to ask questions; that was being done for him by all those who had run to the spot.

He mingled with the crowd, heard their excited inquiries and listened in vain for any answer that might give him a clew as to the thrower of the bomb.

Only one thing seemed to be proved by such replies as he heard and that was that nobody was in the alley at the time.

One man who claimed that he had been sitting upon a stoop at the end of the court, from which he could see straight through the alley to Fourth Street, declared that the place was entirely deserted.

"Didn't you see the thing go through the air?" asked somebody.

"No, I didn't," he replied, "I wasn't watching for anything of that kind and the first I knew of it I heard the sound of broken glass and the noise of the explosion came immediately afterward."

Of course Trim thought of Gardner but he was too experienced to jump to the conclusion that Gardner was the one who had tried to kill him.

"It's more likely," he reflected, "to be some unknown ruffian whom he has hired for the work."

While he was edging his way around in the crowd listening to their talk, somebody caught him by the sleeve.

Trim turned and saw an undersized rough-looking man who whispered eagerly:

"Say, boss, you're the detective, ain't you, wat's workin' up the Hardy murder?"

"Well, what if I am?" returned Trim.

"I seen that bomb go crost the alley," returned the man, "and it came from the second-story window just opposite Hardy & Warren's office."

"You did?"

"Yep! and I know who t'rowed it and can find him for you."

CHAPTER VI.

THE DETECTIVE SENT AWAY BY FAST FREIGHT.

Trim looked the man straight in the eye for a moment and answered:

"All right, go ahead!"

The detective had had too much experience in affairs of this kind not to be suspicious of this fellow.

"This is probably a trick," he reflected, "but it looks like my best way of getting a sight of the people I'm after."

"This way, boss," whispered the stranger hurriedly, going before Trim and leading the way to the street.

The stranger turned the corner and passed in front of the building across the alley.

He glanced in and remarked:

"He was there a minute ago but I guess he's gone on now."

"Well, who was he?" demanded Trim.

"I'll show 'im to you, boss, if you'll come with me."

Trim nodded to show that he was ready to follow and the man went hurriedly down the street toward the river.

He didn't go as far as the river, however, but turned into a side street and from that time pursued a roundabout course.

Trim began to tire of it, but he did not care to show the fellow that he was suspicious of him.

"See here!" he said at last, "you'd better tell me where you're going and then take a short cut.

"I know Cincinnati well enough to know that you are not going in anywhere near as straight a line as you could if you wanted to."

"Why, it's just this way, boss," responded the fellow.

"I'm going to where I think he can be found. I'm lookin' for 'im all the time."

"Then you don't know really where he is or who he is, I suppose."

"Oh! yes, I do. If we don't find 'im in a minute I'll know just where he is."

"Well, when you find him bring him to me," retorted Trim. And he turned on his heel.

It proved that Trim had played the other man's game just a little too long.

He had no sooner turned than a pair of powerful arms were thrown over his head while somebody seized him with equal violence by the legs.

It must not be supposed that the detective had not expected something of this kind.

In fact, in walking deliberately into a trap, he had done so with the utmost confidence that he would beat his adversaries and learn all that he needed to know about them through their own actions.

It had not been a part of his programme, however, to be overcome by them.

Now, struggle as he would, there was no help for it; they had him entirely at disadvantage in the way they took him, and they outnumbered him more than two to one.

How many there were he could not at that time tell; for a cloth was thrown over his head which prevented him from seeing and in a remarkably short time prevented him from realizing anything.

The cloth was saturated with ether.

This affair, taking place in broad daylight, could not have been accomplished if it had not been done with marvelous quickness and in a neighborhood where few people were stirring.

As he began to feel the effects of the ether Trim ceased his struggling and

allowed the men to carry him without trouble.

Even as he was dropping off to sleep he reasoned that the sooner he seemed to be under the influence of ether the sooner they would stop giving it to him; and the sooner, therefore, he would wake from it.

So it happened that he recovered consciousness before the men had set him down.

He could not be sure how far it was that they had carried him; but it afterward proved that it was but a few rods.

Trim's first sensation after waking was that of being pushed as if he were a box upon a platform evidently nearly as high from the ground as the men's heads who carried him.

Thinking that it would be to his advantage to feign complete unconsciousness he lay perfectly still.

He opened his eyes just in time to see a sliding door close in front of him; that shut out all light.

There was a sound of a key turned in a lock; then retreating footsteps; and after that for a few minutes all that the detective could hear was the puffing of locomotives and the noise of rolling cars.

He rose to his feet and felt about him. At first he staggered a little because he was still suffering from the effects of ether.

Clutching at the wall for support he made his way completely around his prison chamber. He reflected a moment and said to himself.

"I'm in a freight car."

Hardly had he come to this conclusion before a violent jolt nearly threw him off his feet.

Immediately afterward he realized that the car was in motion.

It did not take very much reasoning on his part for him to come to an entirely correct conclusion as to the situation.

The scoundrels had planned to destroy him by the bomb and had carefully prepared another device for getting rid of him in case the bomb should fail to do its work.

This was simply to take him to the vicinity of a railroad freight station, overcome him and put him into an empty car fastened to a fast express that was about to depart for some distant part of the country, and leave him there.

"I can see," he reflected, "that their principal aim is to gain time. Of course they would like to get me out of the way forever; but when the bomb failed to effect that the most they dared to attempt in daylight was abduction.

"The probability is that by this time all the scoundrels are gathered together consulting as to what they had better do next; and they presume that I'll be absent for at least a day.

"Perhaps they won't reckon that I'll be gone as long as that. And I guess I won't."

Being now in full possession of his senses he shook both doors of the car and exerted all his strength to open them.

He could not make them budge.

He searched the car over for something to pry with but found nothing.

Meantime the train had attained such speed that if he had succeeded in forcing the door open he would not have ventured to leap out.

"Well," he reflected, "they have left me my revolver and I'll see what that'll do for me."

He drew his weapon from his pocket and stationed himself in the middle of the car; then he waited patiently many minutes, until at last something happened, that he knew must occur some time during the day.

It was simply the walking of a brakeman across the top of the car.

Trim could easily distinguish the man's footsteps above the roar of the train.

Just as soon as the footsteps had passed over his head Trim raised his revolver and fired.

If he had feared that the sound of the weapon could not be heard outside he was immediately relieved by hearing the footsteps hasten as the brakeman jumped in alarm to the car next behind.

Trim immediately fired again and again, each time sending a bullet through the roof straight up into the air.

"If that don't make the train hands set up," he reflected grimly, "I don't know what will."

It did make them sit up. It caused an excited conversation between the brakeman, who had heard the shots, and the conductor, and as a result of it the engineer was signaled to stop the train.

Trim heard the grinding of the brakes against the wheels as the train slowed up, with a great deal of satisfaction. As soon as it had come to a dead stop he fired his revolver again in order that there might be no mistake about the fact that somebody was in the empty car.

Presently he heard cautious footsteps on top of the car next behind him and a voice cried:

"Hello there!"

"Hello yourself!" shouted Trim at the top of his voice.

The man who had shouted to him then asked a rather senseless question:

"What are you doing there?"

"I'm waiting to be let out," howled Trim.

After a slight pause the conductor shouted:

"What did you get into that car for?"

"I didn't get in," Trim bawled, "I was put in.

"I don't want to hurt anybody; I fired my revolver to attract attention."

After this the train hands consulted again and then got down and came to the side of the car.

"Why," said one of them in surprise, "there's a padlock on the door!"

This was unusual for freight-car doors are usually made fast with a hasp. And if they are sealed it is with a light wire.

Trim called to the men again for he realized that they must be somewhat alarmed:

"If you think I'm a lunatic," he said, "I don't blame you; but you're mistaken; I shan't hurt anybody.

"Get an axe or a sledge hammer and bust the padlock."

The conductor, amazed more than ever, sent one of the men to the caboose for both of the implements Trim mentioned.

In a few minutes some well-directed blows shattered the padlock, and then Trim himself shoved the door open.

As he did so all the train hands jumped back, except one who leveled a revolver at him.

Trim threw up both hands and laughed.

"I surrender," he said, "and the quicker you let me get out of this the quicker your train can go on."

The conductor saw that he was perfectly sane and that he meant no harm and therefore ordered the man with the revolver to put it up.

The detective then jumped down and briefly explained the situation.

"The rascals reckoned mighty well," said the conductor, "for this is the only empty car on the train; and if you hadn't fired your revolver, and so attracted attention, you would have been a hundred miles from Cincinnati before the train would have stopped. And I don't know when the car would have been opened for our orders are to deliver it to another road, and where it will go then, I don't know."

"How far am I from Cincinnati?" Trim asked.

The question was almost needless for

he could see the outskirts of the city by looking up the track.

"If you want to go back in a hurry," said the conductor, "go up the track for a quarter of a mile where you'll find a way station at which a passenger train will stop in about ten minutes."

Trim thanked him and hurried on.

CHAPTER VII.

THE BIGGEST SURPRISE OF TRIM'S LIFE.

Within a quarter of an hour from the time when Trim was bundled into the freight car he was upon Central Avenue, hurrying toward Gardner's office.

Of course he had completely changed his disguise.

On his way he had to pass the office of Hardy & Warren.

A crowd of curious persons still hung around there watching the effect of the bomb and wondering about it.

Policemen were on guard in abundance and Trim did not feel it necessary to stop and ask for any information.

"If those fellows," he throught, "are not at Gardner's I'll set the whole police force in scouring the city in search of them.

"I've seen one of them; and the man Gardner is another, or at least he's back of it."

Arrived at Gardner's office the detective found that a small boy was in charge. Trim was pleased that the office was not shut up.

"Is Mr. Gardner in?" he asked.

"No."

"Be in soon?"

"I guess so."

"Has he been in this morning?"

"Yep."

"Then I'll wait for him."

Trim sat down, unfolded a newspaper and pretended to read.

He saw that the boy was eying him narrowly.

"Say, mister," the youngster said after a moment.

"Well."

"If you tell me your business perhaps I can find Mr. Gardner for you."

"All right," Trim returned. "Tell him that it's a friend of Frank Beck's."

This was an inspiration.

The idea came to Trim like a flash as he recalled how carefully Beck had been not to give any evidence that might implicate Gardner.

"Those two men are friends," he thought.

"Under the circumstances a message from Beck may mean a good deal to Gardner and he may want to know what it is."

The boy left the office and had not been gone two minutes before the door opened and four men came in.

One of them Trim recognized.

It was the tough customer who had decoyed him to the freight yard.

"Did you want to see Mr. Gardner?" asked another of the men.

"Yes. Is that your name?"

"It is. What does Beck want?"

"I reckon," Trim responded, "that he wants you arrested for the murder of John Hardy."

With this he whipped out his revolver and covered the group with it.

It is needless to say that they were terribly startled, and but for the detective's promptness in resorting to his weapon there would have been a fight or a break for liberty.

As it was they stood perfectly still for an instant while Trim was rapidly debating how best he could make them all prisoners.

Before they had recovered from their shock, the office boy returned; seeing the situation he was about to run away in terror when Trim called to him.

"Come back here, young fellow," he said.

The boy obeyed.

Trim took his supply of handcuffs from his pocket and dropped them on the floor.

"One at a time now, my son, fix every man; and you fellows understand that the first man who stirs will get carried out of here on a stretcher."

The handcuffing process was quickly accomplished and before it was done Gardner broke down.

"I suppose you're the detective employed on the Hardy case," he said.

"And I suppose," returned Trim grimly, "that you're the man who tried to kill me with a bomb."

"Thank Heaven, I didn't succeed," Gardner responded.

"And I wish I hadn't been crazy enough to try, for I'm entirely innocent of the murder of John Hardy."

"You can tell that to a jury," was Trim's response.

The other men kept their mouths shut.

As it proved later, they were professional criminals who had been hired by Gardner to protect him when he conceived a desperate plan of avoiding the suspicions of a detective.

They realized their situation sufficiently to say nothing that might be used against them in the future: accordingly Trim marched his prisoners to the nearest police station without difficulty, although the affair attracted immense attention in the street.

He himself answered no questions about it; but the police were not so silent; they felt so pleased at the detective's success that they gave out information regarding it to everybody.

One of the results of this was that within an hour extra editions of the evening papers were being sold upon the streets, in which it was announced in big type that the murderer of John Hardy had been captured.

Trim, after attending to the details that always accompany such matters, as for example, the making of a formal statement about what he had done, to the superintendent of police, returned to the office of Hardy & Warren to finish up his work, by making an examination of the bomb, or what was left of it, that had been thrown at him.

The evening papers had been upon the street for about an hour before he arrived at Hardy & Warren's office.

Shortly after he entered a policeman came in to say that there was a man who wanted to see him.

"Who is he?" asked Trim.

"He doesn't give his name but he says he has got information about the murder that he thinks you ought to have."

"Well," said Trim, "the more evidence the better, I suppose. Let him come in."

The policeman went out and returned in a moment with a man, who from his general appearance and manners could not be mistaken for anything but a farmer.

His face was pale and haggard.

"Well, sir," said Trim, "what can I do for you or you for me?"

The man looked over his shoulder to see that the policeman had left the room.

"Can I sit down?" he asked.

"Certainly," Trim replied.

The man accordingly drew up a chair at the corner of a desk and Trim took a chair in front of it.

"My name," said the stranger, "is Jonathan Dexter.

"I've got a farm out here in Hamilton County.

"I've been trading with Hardy & Warren since they've went into their infernal swindling business."

"Then I suppose," said Trim, "you were one of the unfortunate men who were bitten by them."

"Bitten!" repeated Dexter with a savage oath.

"I should think I was, sir. I've been completely ruined.

"My little property is all gone.

"All my hopes in life are gone; and yesterday I had only one thing to live for!"

"What was that?" asked Trim who was greatly struck by the man's earnestness.

Dexter's voice shook slightly as he spoke, but his words came slowly and with evident determination to have his say completely out.

"I'll tell you in a minute, Mr. Carter, I believe that's your name," he said.

"But I want to begin by saying to you that you've got the wrong man."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that Bert Gardner didn't murder Jack Hardy, and I can prove it."

"Well," said Trim, "that's important. If I've made a mistake I should be only too glad to find where I'm wrong."

"I don't believe it's any fault of yours," returned Dexter. "They say you're a clever young man and a square man; and although I've got a terrible load of sin on my soul, I'm a square man too. Now you listen:

"I had just one thing to live for yesterday, and that was revenge. I got it. When I had got done with it, I didn't care what happened; but to-day I find there's one more thing to live for and I want to see that that's got too.

"That thing is justice, Mr. Carter."

"Justice? for whom?" asked Trim cautiously.

"Justice for an innocent man, sir.

"Bert Gardner, so far as I know anything about his business, deserves life imprisonment for his hand in these swindling operations; but he's not the murderer.

"I don't think you want to see him hung for a crime that he didn't commit."

"Certainly not."

"Well, then, Mr. Carter, you must know that I got my revenge yesterday when I crept in on Jack Hardy in that room yonder through the outside door and cut his throat as I would stick a pig!

"Don't stop me yet! I've seen by the evening papers, and I've heard talk on the street how you've got evidence against Bert Gardner that will convict.

"I can't stand that, sir.

"I was mad with disappointment and grief at the way these scoundrels ruined me; and I killed Jack Hardy; but I'm sane to-day. I look back coolly at that to-day and no matter what happens to me 'twas a just deed, for Jack Hardy deserved it.

"The one thing I've got to live for is to see that Gardner is not punished for that crime.

"Do you believe me, Mr. Carter?"

"Yes," said Trim in a low voice, "I do. I'm sorry for you——"

"Save your sorrow, Mr. Carter, it's all right if you believe me."

With a quick movement Dexter drew a revolver from his pocket, pressed the muzzle against his breast, and fired.

Trim leaped from his chair the moment he saw what was about to be done and seized Dexter by the arm.

He was too late to prevent the ball from taking effect; but he did cause it to take a course that was not immediately fatal.

"You poor madman," exclaimed Trim, "you don't realize that in killing yourself you prevent your testimony in behalf of Gardner from being of the greatest value."

The detective then did everything that could possibly be done to save Dexter's life.

He succeeded so far that the man did not die until he had been taken to a hospital where he made an ante-mortem statement that completely cleared Gardner from the charge of murder.

This tragic event helped greatly to clear up many doubtful points in the case; and it showed Trim among other things how he had been following a bogus clew from the beginning.

It made him also determine in the interests of justice to make some further investigation into the swindling schemes operated by Hardy & Warren.

Of course Gardner, although the charge of murder was withdrawn against him, was held for his attempt upon the detective's life and his accomplices were held also.

As there was no charge against Warren and Beck that could be sustained at that time, they were released: and Trim let it be understood that he was done with them.

To use one of his favorite expressions, however, he felt that they "would bear watching."

The results of his watching have been recorded in "Trim's Secret Mission; or, A Green Countryman in Town," No. 18 New Nick Carter Library.

[THE END.]

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